

DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

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For Immediate Release August 18, 2011 Contact: Rodney Mallett Phone: 225-219-3964

Responsible party comes forward in Pearl River fish kill

BATON ROUGE – On Wednesday, Aug. 17, DEQ received a letter from the Temple-Inland Bogalusa Paper Mill that stated that the facility had an exceedance of its maximum permit limit for biological oxygen demand, which the company believes may have led to the depleted oxygen level that killed thousands of fish in the Pearl River in Washington and St. Tammany Parishes.

This statement is consistent with what the department has witnessed, and what early water monitoring data, beginning on Sat., Aug. 13, indicated. The department received word of a large fish kill on the river near Bogalusa from a media source on Saturday morning, several hours before the company reported a fish kill in the Pearl River.

"We received word of a fish kill event Saturday morning and dispatched water quality experts to the Pearl River," said Secretary Peggy Hatch. "This quick response helped us to identify the probable source of a slug of poorly treated wastewater that can produce low dissolved oxygen conditions in the river. The low DO, coupled with the historic low flow in the river led to an extensive fish kill. That's the bad news. The good news is the dissolved oxygen levels in the river show signs that it is already beginning to recover."

The material causing the low dissolved oxygen was paper mill effluent with excessive "black liquor" as a result of an equipment malfunction. Black liquor contains lignin separated from wood pulp. Wood pulp is used to make paper. It is produced by cooking wood chips and adding sodium hydroxide, which has a high pH. The process breaks down lignin and makes the liquor easily digested by bacteria in the water. The digestion robs the water of oxygen and suffocates fish.

While there are no indications that persistent chemicals are involved in the fish kill, DEQ is waiting on sample results to confirm that the cause of the fish kill was low dissolved oxygen alone. Initial sample results are scheduled to be back from the lab on Friday, with additional results coming later. When DEQ's investigation is complete, the agency will take appropriate enforcement action. Louisiana law also requires restitution to the state for loss of the fish as a public resource.

Evidence of the fish kill extends south to the US Highway 90 bridge over the West Pearl River. No dead fish have been confirmed south of this point, but normal stream flow is expected to carry some carcasses downstream. However, thousands of dead fish remain in the river system. Officials at Temple-Inland have hired workers to clean up dead fish and have established a reporting line for areas in need at 985-516-9192. The DEQ asks that citizens witnessing the fish kill use common sense and avoid handling or eating fish that are already dead or acting abnormally.

The Temple-Inland letter and a timeline of how the events took place are available at www.deq.louisiana.gov.

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